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**Historical Clarity:  
Disciple-Making and the Church Growth Movement**

**Robert D. Hopper**

What does it mean when someone says they are a “disciple”? In Webster’s Dictionary, the word “disciple” is listed as a noun, indicating a completion of verb action. Webster defines the term as a “follower of a particular teacher; an adherent of the principles of some leader of thought, especially one of the twelve personal followers of Jesus Christ; sometimes, any follower of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> A basic working definition could then be: “a disciple is a follower of the person of Jesus Christ and an adherent to his teaching.” An “Adherent” sticks fast to something; clinging; attached, and a “follower” is an imitator; an attendant, retainer, or servant.<sup>2</sup> The implication is that a disciple has a relationship with the leader, understands some of the expectations the leader has for that relationship to exist and continue, and has a measure of desire to maintain the relationship. To become a “disciple” in the noun sense would require the seeker to investigate and understand to their satisfaction, the teachings of the leader and their implications before a decision to follow is made. In other words, it would be a decision to commit themselves to their maturing by the leader. The question is, what is meant by Jesus in Matthew 28:19 when he says, “go and make disciples.” The answer has obvious theological and practical considerations for one’s ministry. Much of local church ministry is pragmatic, but programmatic ministry operates best on the underpinnings of theological clarity. In the case of

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 1998

making disciples, knowing what outcome is being sought will help determine the type and extent of the programming that will be the vehicle of bringing about such outcome.

*A. Semantic Confusion*

So, what do these words “go and make disciples” mean? Does this mean that the present disciples are to go and proclaim in such a way as to gain a hearing, and once that is achieved, to help those hearers understand what is required of them prior to making a decision to become a disciple too? If we understand the word “disciple” in its noun form the answer would be affirmative. This would require the present disciples to strategize as to how they might gain a hearing, in order that they might share, and hopefully persuade some to make a decision to become a disciple too, which means, to enter into the maturing process. It could be said that if the presenters are not gaining a hearing then their strategizing is insufficient. Moreover, if someone wants to become a disciple before some basic implications of that choice are clarified, then the person should be held off until some basic understandings have been communicated.

However, this is not the understanding of the average Christian today. There has been a separation of decision-making and maturing. They are separate entities in the minds of most Christians. The first is called “evangelizing” and the second “discipling.” Critics of the Church Growth Movement charge that the movement is only interested in numbers, meaning the increase of the church numerically. Often the implication, if not outright cry, is that these attenders are not being evangelized. Any time a seeker is in a church service the expectation is that a call for a decision be given and that the person be persuaded to become a Christian. Even if the seeker does not understand the implications of such a decision. The belief is that the only way to get large numbers of people into the church is to hide the implications of the gospel, to “water it down,” to eliminate the “costs.” That is, to eliminate this call for a decision, which in many traditions means coming forward to an altar.

Further, critics of church growth claim that there is not

sufficient enough interest in discipling or maturing believers. Once again, the belief is that church growth proponents are only into numerical growth, advocating “making disciples” rather than “discipling believers.” Using the term “making disciples” in this sense, equating it exclusively with a decision, and using “discipling believers” to refer exclusively to the maturing of the believer is contrary to the use of the word “disciple” in the New Testament. Disciple making in the New Testament encompasses both concepts. It is not an either/or proposition, but both. The concept of making disciples is a broad concept with many components. Without this understanding the term is narrowly defined and made synonymous with the evangelism component. In some cases, the term is equated with the maturing of the believer. Both actions do injustice to church growth.

By equating making disciples with evangelism it limits the outcomes to decisions and numbers—when in reality when disciple-making is engaged in from a New Testament perspective, the outcome is mature, engaged followers of Christ. This is less tangible, more difficult to measure, and requires a depth of commitment to the individual and their maturing than decisions and attendance requires, but reflects better the intent of Jesus, and for that matter, Donald McGavran as well.

The subject is complicated even more in that there is not consensus within the Church Growth Movement over what these terms “go and make disciples” imply. Donald McGavran, the pioneer of the Church Growth Movement, seems to equate discipling with the evangelistic decision to receive Christ, rather than with maturing as much of the laity understand it to mean.

In his book, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate*, Donald McGavran defines what the term “make disciples” found in Matthew 28:19 means to him. Identifying Jesus as the ultimate authority on the subject, he asks the question, “What is this ultimate Authority going to say?”<sup>3</sup> The answer is as follows:

Is He going to say, “Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself”? That certainly is an important command, but He doesn’t say it here. Is He going to say, “Go

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 1998

to church and worship God”? That also is important, but it is not what He says. What He does say is, “*Therefore matheteusate panta ta ethne.*” *Matheteusate* is a verb in the imperative. It means enroll in my school or enlist in my army or incorporate in my body. *Panta* means all, and *ta ethne* means the peoples, the tribes, the castes, the segments of society everywhere. All are to be disciplined.<sup>4</sup>

McGavran is confusing because this passage can be interpreted in multiple ways. The command “make disciples” can be interpreted as obtaining decisions, that is, persuading people to “enroll” into the Kingdom. However, he implies that the person is signing up to be in an army. In the contemporary since, someone who signs up for the military knows the commitment they are making in advance, and if they do not follow through then there are consequences. McGavran could be understood to mean that to “make disciples” is to see to it that the person understands that they are enrolling for the purposes of becoming like the leader, Jesus Christ, his disciple.

McGavran’s preference for interpreting “make disciples” as meaning the evangelistic decision to receive Christ is seen clearly in an early work, *Bridges of God*. Here McGavran makes the distinction between “discipling” and “perfecting.” “Discipling” means to persuade someone to become a Christian, whereas, “perfecting” is the task of maturing the disciple.<sup>5</sup> McGavran makes this sharp distinction, and maintains this distinction throughout his writings. For the most part, the Church Growth Movement advocates going and discipling, that is, making evangelistic decisions first, then concentrating on perfecting. However, the premise of this writer is that to make such a definite distinction between the two concepts, to align “make disciples” so closely to the evangelistic decision does not represent the New Testament intention accurately enough. Also, it creates confusion within the Church Growth Movement over what each other is taking about, and opens the door for criticism that this is a numbers game. For one, “make disciples,” means to convert someone, another to mature them, and others both. “Discipling” can also be understood to mean either “to

convert” or “to mature.”

*B. The Absence Of A Theological Framework*

The question begs answering. Why does this semantic confusion exist? Who is responsible for clarifying what is meant? Ultimately it is up to each theological tradition to define what these terms mean and how they are to be utilized. Yet this will not clear up the confusion, unless each author defines what the terms mean so that the audience can correctly understand the author’s intent. Ultimately, though, the Church Growth Movement must define a theological and semantic basis from which it operates. But there are inherent dangers, simply because the Church Growth Movement has such a diverse theological constituency. McGavran is sensitive to this issue.

The Church Growth Movement has often been criticized on theological grounds. Many have maintained that it pays too little attention to correct doctrine, infilling of the Holy Spirit, prayer, revival, and the active Christian life. The Church Growth Movement, however, believes itself to be basically sound in theology. It is advocating church growth on unassailable biblical grounds. It assumes that church growth will be carried out chiefly by those who are born-again Christians filled with the Holy Spirit. How, then, to respond to this criticism.<sup>6</sup>

McGavran provides assumptions that outline a brief biblical framework from which church growth could operate. However, he does not flesh this out or formalize it. This leaves him open to criticism from both the right and the left. McGavran goes on to explain his reluctance to develop a comprehensive theological base.

First, it points out that the church growth movement has arisen on inter-denominational grounds. Its founder wrote his first book, *The Bridges of God*, not for his own denomination or missionary society but for all denominations and all missionary societies....

How did this interdenominational setting affect the theology of the church growth movement? ...Distinctive doctrines of different denominations were seldom

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 1998

mentioned.<sup>7</sup>

This points to a reason for confusion today. It appears that McGavran's intent from the beginning was to appeal to theological diversity and leave within each tradition the task of defining what they were hoping to achieve when "making disciples." McGavran says:

At the School of World Mission career missionaries and other students have come from more than seventy denominations. The faculty at both the Institute of Church Growth and the School of World Mission was composed of men from many branches of the church. Yet they were all basically united in one concern, that God's command to effectively evangelize the people of the world be carried out.<sup>8</sup>

The result that McGavran intended has occurred, theological diversity, yet pragmatic unity. By building a theological framework that was perhaps too narrow, the Movement inherently could have excluded certain theological traditions, and for the most part, declared indirectly that they need to be evangelized. On the other hand, a theological construct too broad would have alienated certain evangelical groups who, for the most part, were the target group that McGavran was most aligned with theologically, and who would probably be the most responsive to his message.

Arthur Glasser gives us additional insight into why McGavran would not be inclined to promote the construction of a comprehensive theology of church growth. First, McGavran's heritage is the Disciples of Christ, an early 19th century restoration movement that emerged in reaction to the perceived division within many sectors of the church. The belief was that the church needed to place a higher priority on the unity of the body of Christ by reestablishing the faith of the New Testament. Glasser points out that they believed the "creeds of the Reformers kept Christians apart."<sup>9</sup> While this does not mean that they rejected the creeds, it meant that they were going to place a higher emphasis on unity, and not

make creeds binding. Today the Disciples of Christ still have not developed a comprehensive theology, and remain actively involved in the promotion of unity within the body of Christ. This background is a factor as to why McGavran could concentrate on pragmatic issues rather than theology.

Further, this background had an effect on his theological method. Glasser says, "Dr. McGavran's theological method does not involve the orderly unfolding of a system based on inner-evolved principles. He is no system builder, operating according to a particular set of self-selected norms."<sup>10</sup> Later Glasser adds:

In Dr. McGavran we have a missiologist, not a theologian in the traditional sense. His all consuming interest is the biblical priority that he describes as "the center" of the church's task. The center is the proclamation of the Gospel, the gathering of converts into existing congregations, the multiplying of new congregations, in short the extension of the Christian movement by all available means.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, it is likely that in a typical church growth class, you have a theological diversity that interprets the task of "making disciples" in multiple ways. For a Calvinist, they might be inclined to equate the concept with a decision for Christ, since a true Calvinist would hold that the decision-maker's salvation is now assured even if maturing does not occur. An Episcopal priest may listen and interpret the dialogue about decisions as meaningless since infant baptism is what saves you and partaking of the Sacrament is what keeps you, so the priest may interpret "make disciples" as maturing the regenerate, or getting church attendance higher. This is not a criticism. The theological diversity is what makes interdenominational seminaries so appealing. But for our purposes, without a clear theological framework upon which church growth is operated, then the door is open for the very intent of McGavran to be nullified, in that, anyone is eligible to use church growth principles and methods to achieve their purpose of growing a church. Thus, the conversion of sinners, their enfolding into the local church and their maturing until death could be lost

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 1998



(the very thing that McGavran is hoping to achieve).

This call for a more comprehensive theological framework, along with semantic clarification, from which church growth theory and methodology springs forth from is an on going necessity. The belief is that this will ensure that church growth practitioners are actually accomplishing what Christ intended, and communicating in terms that are reflect a commonality. Precisely what Charles Van Engen of Fuller Seminary is attempting to foster through his Theology of Church Growth class. Van Engen has pinpointed a key issue related to this subject in his book, *The Growth of the True Church*.

What has not been worked out in relation to the “discipling”-“perfecting” distinction is a complete theology of conversion. Although the Church Growth Movement has spoken much about conversion, especially in terms of “Multi-individual conversion,” yet the precise theological foundation of this has not yet been developed. What relation does “discipling” have to justification and sanctification?<sup>12</sup>

A theology of conversion articulated by McGavran would have provided the Church Growth Movement with an understanding of what the theological goal of “making disciples” is about, and the salvation pathway the prospect is headed toward. By providing a theology of conversion, McGavran could have helped avoid a theological dilemma that is emerging within the Church Growth Movement, and that is a tolerance for universal salvation. While the subject has gone virtually unaddressed in church growth literature, it is an issue of concern for evangelicals. In St. Louis, Missouri, for example, where this writer resides, universal salvation is deeply enriched in the minds of Catholics and even touches evangelical churches. The ecumenical churches object to evangelicals insisting on a conversion experience, and abhor the proselytizing of their group. Yet, these priests and pastors can discuss church growth principles, methods, and terminology with ease. There is theological conflict, yet church growth unity. This is a perplexing problem. The question is, does the Church Growth Movement see

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 1998

a responsibility for ensuring that when McGavran speaks of “discipling” that it is clear that this includes experiencing a spiritual new birth? Melvin Hodges would say they should.

Since we accept the words of Jesus that a man who has not been born from above cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, and since God commands all men everywhere to repent, we are obligated to preach repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ as the means of salvation to the nominal Christian as well as the pagan (Acts 20:21; Acts 17:30). This should be done primarily to fulfill our responsibility to God for those souls who have never heard the word of saving faith, and not for the sake of proselyting or adding to the number of our own group.<sup>13</sup>

Arthur Johnston notes that even Donald McGavran would agree with this desire.

Church Growth theology has been classified and refined as it has met the scrutiny of both evangelical and non-evangelical missiologists. If McGavran’s earlier theology conveyed the impression of a mass approach in opposition to individual conversion, his late statements strongly support the need for personal faith in Christ as essential for the salvation of individuals....<sup>14</sup>

Yet, Johnston is quick to point out that the primary purpose that McGavran has served is to remind us of the need to be responsible in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

While there are a number of theological details and nuances concerning which evangelicals may differ, the church growth movement has provided to non-evangelical missiologists and the missionary movement in general a strong case for a return to the historic evangelistic mission of the church. It has also reminded the parachurch movements of evangelicalism of their ultimate responsibility to contribute directly toward the growth of visible local churches. If the theology of the church growth

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 1998

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movement retains its present biblical orientation, its contribution to the work of evangelization may be even more significant in the future than it has been in the past.<sup>15</sup>

Key in the quote above is the phrase “a strong case for a return to the historic evangelistic mission of the church.” Perhaps this is the crux of the matter. The primary need addressed by Donald McGavran was the apathetic, lethargic, and miscued focus of the body of Christ. McGavran served the Church as a prophetic voice, a modern day John the Baptist, heralding the news that God was on a mission to redeem the world and the Church was his medium to accomplish that objective. Any cursory connection with the Church today reveals that it worked. Church Growth is one of the most prominent Movements of this era. And while there continues to be critics, both justified and unjustified, and confusion over what is the final goal of church growth endeavors, concern over who engages in the methodology and to what end they really serve, and semantic misunderstandings, the Church is heeding the intent of Jesus when he issued the Commission. Without this catalytic action the Spirit provides through the Church Growth Movement, the Church most likely will be endanger of becoming self-focused and complacent, and that is the greatest threat to the task of disciple-making, confusion or no confusion.

With that said, it is imperative for those who engage in church growth to retain this catalytic contribution to the body of Christ, and at the same time clarify that making disciples is a multi-component process that results in people being brought to a place of maturity and involvement in the Kingdom enterprise. Thus, the Church Growth Movement serves the body of Christ by its undaunting commitment to seeing the Great Commission fulfilled, by rooting practitioners in a biblical orientation, by clarifying objectives and semantics, and by training church leaders in the skills and methodologies that will enable them to be effective in Great Commission endeavors.

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 1998

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## NOTES

1. *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, College Edition, s.v. "disciple."
2. Ibid.
3. Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988), 17.
4. Ibid.
5. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship and London, World Dominion, 1955), 13.
6. McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 106.
7. Ibid., 106–7.
8. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 107.
9. Arthur F. Glasser, "An Introduction to the Church Growth Perspectives of Donald Anderson McGavran," in *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1977), 23.
10. Ibid., 26.
11. Ibid.
12. Charles Edward Van Engen, *The Growth Of The True Church: An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), 516.
13. Melvin L. Hodges, *A Theology Of The Church And Its Mission: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1977), 95.
14. Arthur P. Johnston, "Church Growth Theology And World Evangelization," in *Theology And Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 199.
15. Ibid., 201.